

MESSAGES FROM SPACE

In reading a book by Carl Sagan, I encountered the case he makes for the importance of receiving a message from some other world out there in the universe. The reasoning is that the senders of such a message would have a technology more advanced than ours in order to send it. If so, they have passed through the stage which we Earthlings are in right now and have survived it. And if they could survive it, we can too.

It is interesting to note that a non-dummy like Sagan can really feel as I do that there is a very good chance that we might not survive very long. He says that even if it takes ten or twenty years to decode the message, merely receiving it would give us great hope.

Sagan suggests that among the first contents of such a message may be detailed prescriptions for the avoidance of technological disaster, and perhaps straightforward solutions, still undiscovered on Earth, to problems of food shortages, population growth, energy supplies, dwindling resources, pollution and war.

Though Sagan's own reading is very broad, apparently he limits his social sciences reading so that the very much discovered solutions have eluded him. It often occurs to me to wonder at what point we can say that something is discovered or known. One of our leading examples is in the motions of our planets around the sun. Copernicus is given credit for the discovery only about five hundred years ago and it took some real heroism along with numerous burnings-at-the-stake to get those facts accepted. Actually, over two thousand years ago, Aristarchus knew those basic motions.

When is a thing really known? When the first person who knows it knows it? When five percent of the people know it? When it is so widely known that no one needs to make any mental effort to learn it? If the latter, then there is not much hope.

Do we need a radio message from another solar system to shake us out of the nonsense that the solution to food shortages is for all of us to pay each other not to produce food? What if that civilization had never had a stage when it burdened itself with our reverse taxation system? If they had never thought to exact the heaviest penalties from their best producers and grant privileges to exploiters, could they even suspect that we need to be warned of the consequences? Couldn't their greediest people have always known that their own best interest lay in permitting rather than stifling improvements?

I once gave a talk about taxation to a local service club. The mood of that time, as it is now, was to commiserate over how hard it is to collect enough to pay legitimate public expenses. I said that if I could be given total tax jurisdiction over just a few (say ten) of the 574 square miles in our county, I could bring in enough to support all of the schools, and roads, and parks, and libraries, and fire protection, and law enforcement in the whole county at a level higher than they are presently supported, AND leave the present occupants of those square miles with a better income than they are now getting. And it wouldn't cost the rest of the county anything.

How can I get more for less? I wouldn't. I would just simply quit getting less from more.